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Citation: 93 Foreign Aff. 26 2014



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Sat Jul 26 17:18:32 2014

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What Really Happened in Chile

The CIA, the Coup Against Allende, and the Rise of Pinochet

Jack Devine

On September 9, 1973, I was eating lunch at Da Carla, an Italian restaurant in Santiago, Chile, when a colleague joined my table and whispered in my ear: "Call home immediately; it's urgent." At the time, I was serving as a clandestine CIA officer. Chile was my first overseas assignment, and for an eager young spymaster, it was a plum job. Rumors of a military coup against the socialist Chilean president, Salvador Allende, had been swirling for months. There had already been one attempt. Allende's opponents were taking to the streets. Labor strikes and economic disarray made basic necessities difficult to find. Occasionally, bombs rocked the capital. The whole country seemed exhausted and tense. In other words, it was exactly the kind of place that every newly minted CIA operative wants to be.

I ducked out of the restaurant as discreetly as I could and headed to the CIA station to place a secure call to my

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wife. She was caring for our five young children, and it was our first time living abroad as a family, so she could have been calling about any number of things. But I had a hunch that her call was very important and related to my work, and it was.

"Your friend called from the airport," my wife said. "He's leaving the country. He told me to tell you, 'The military has decided to move. It's going to happen on September 11. The navy will lead it off.'"

This call from my "friend"—a businessman and former officer in the Chilean navy who was also a source for the CIA—was the first indication the agency's station in Santiago had received that the Chilean military had set a coup in motion. Not long after, a second source of mine, another prominent businessman connected to the Chilean military, called for an emergency meeting; he and I agreed to meet at his house just after dark. He confirmed the earlier report and added one key detail: the coup would begin at 7 AM. Citing my two sources, I sent CIA headquarters in Langley a special type of top-secret cable known as a CRITIC, which takes priority over all other cables and goes directly to the highest levels of government. President Richard Nixon and other top U.S. policymakers received it immediately. "A coup attempt will be initiated on 11 September," the cable read. "All three branches of the armed forces and the *carabineros* [Chile's national police] are involved in this action. A declaration will be read on Radio Agricultura at 7 a.m. on 11 September. . . . The *carabineros* have the responsibility for seizing President Salvador Allende."



Regime change: carrying Allende's body, September 11, 1973

That is how the U.S. government learned of the coup in Chile. This might be hard for many Americans, Chileans, and people elsewhere to believe, since it has become conventional wisdom, especially on the left, that Washington played a crucial role in the military-led overthrow of the democratically elected Allende, which resulted in the nearly 17-year authoritarian rule of General Augusto Pinochet. The coup in Chile is often included in indictments of U.S. covert action during the Cold War, during which the United States, at the direction of a number of presidents, sometimes took actions of questionable wisdom to prevent or reverse the rise of leftists who Washington feared might lead their countries into the Soviet orbit. But I can say with conviction that the CIA did not plot with the Chilean military to overthrow Allende in 1973.

It is important to set this straight for the sake of history: the CIA should not be blamed for bad outcomes it did not produce. In general, U.S. covert operations have worked far more often than anyone not involved in intelligence work would guess. But some misguided covert operations have hurt the United States more than they helped it, including the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba and the coupling of covert missile sales to Iran with illegal support provided to Nicaraguan insurgents during the 1980s, which came to be known as the Iran-contra affair. To avoid such missteps, policymakers and the public need to understand what makes a covert operation wise or unwise. That distinction is often hard to see even when everyone agrees on the basic facts. The persistent mischaracterizations of Washington's role in the 1973 coup in Chile have muddied the waters, making it

harder to have a productive debate about covert action.

TWO-TRACK MINDS

Admittedly, one primary cause of the confusion about the 1973 coup is the unquestionable fact that the United States helped launch an earlier coup attempt against Allende. In September 1970, after Allende finished first in a three-way presidential election, Nixon summoned CIA Director Richard Helms to the White House and told him in no uncertain terms to foment a preventive coup—one that would keep Allende from taking office despite his victory. The leadership of the agency believed that any attempt to keep Allende from taking office would fail and also lead to bloodshed, especially in the short time frame Nixon demanded. But Nixon believed that it was essential to U.S. interests to try it and ordered the CIA to conceal the plans from the U.S. ambassador to Chile and other U.S. officials in the country. The plot came to be known as Track II—a secret complement to Track I, the political and propaganda effort that Washington had mounted earlier to keep Allende from being elected in the first place.

Track II was clearly a major mistake. The Chilean military wanted no part of a coup after the election, and the Chilean people were not supportive of blocking Allende. Even though his margin of victory was very small, Allende had been elected through a democratic system that the Chilean military had supported for more than a century. Later, his government's mishandling of the economy would galvanize opposition in both quarters. But in the early fall of 1970, Allende had not yet taken office, so

there was not even a justifiable pretext for action.

The officers in the CIA station in Santiago felt little enthusiasm for a coup, and the station chief did not hide his doubts. "Parameter of action is exceedingly narrow and available options are quite limited," he cabled Washington immediately after Allende's election victory. "Urge you do not convey impression that station has sure-fire method for halting, let alone triggering coup attempts," read another message, sent around the same time. But the White House and Langley ignored these warnings and pressed for action. In September 1970, Helms even sent the agency's head of covert operations to Santiago to tell the station chief that if he wasn't prepared to press for a coup, he could return to the United States that day. The station chief agreed to do the best he could, but he remained pessimistic.

On October 22, 1970, a group of retired military officers tried to initiate a coup by kidnapping General René Schneider, the commander in chief of the Chilean army, who staunchly opposed military intervention in Chilean politics. The CIA was aware of the plan. But the kidnapping went awry: instead of abducting Schneider, the plotters wound up killing him. The country immediately rallied around Allende, who was inaugurated 12 days later. At that point, all coup plotting ended and Nixon drastically altered his policy. The new goal was to support the political opposition and avoid giving Allende an excuse to exploit anti-American sentiment to increase his domestic popularity and international support.

THE MEDIA ACCOUNT

In response to the new policy, the CIA resumed its strategy of supporting Allende's domestic political opponents and making sure Allende did not dismantle the institutions of democracy: the media outlets, political parties, and labor organizations that formed the Chilean opposition. CIA officers were under strict orders to make contact with the military only for the purpose of gathering intelligence, not fomenting coups.

But Washington was still determined to support Allende's foes, and that meant the CIA's job was to recruit people who could supply the U.S. government with secrets and act at its behest. My first recruit was a senior Communist Party official with whom the station had maintained periodic contact for a number of years but who had not been put on the payroll. Our go-between with this official was a local businessman, who agreed to set up a lunch at his home for me and the official so that I could make the pitch. I was apprehensive, but our host tried to put me at ease. He graciously served us a local delicacy, a deep dish of *erizos*: raw sea urchins. Fortunately, he accompanied the *erizos* with an excellent bottle of Santa Rita 120 white wine. After every spoonful of *erizos*, I took a big sip. Before long, the *erizos* started to taste better, and the target seemed more amenable to cooperation. But I took too long to get to the point for our host, who finally blurted out, in so many words, "How much money are you going to give this Communist for his cooperation?" I immediately suggested \$1,000 per month, and the official accepted.

My most important responsibility at the time was handling the "media

account," especially the CIA's relationship with *El Mercurio*, the oldest and most influential newspaper in Chile. The newspaper's owner feared that Allende's government might expropriate his businesses and put the media under government control; that made him a natural ally for the agency. The paper never used propaganda to deliberately mislead readers about the Allende government's economic policies, but between the lines, it did emphasize stories about the government's seizures of private property, the illegal and violent actions of certain segments of the ruling coalition, and the specter of economic disaster.

Although a notion persists that *El Mercurio* was an organ of the CIA, the agency had no role in what was printed in the paper. In fact, the editor did not take kindly to outside influence on editorial operations, and the CIA met only with the business side of the paper. The agency did not want to co-opt *El Mercurio*; rather, it wanted to ensure continued press freedom. The Allende government did not officially censor the media, and half a dozen independent daily newspapers in Santiago represented the full spectrum of political opinion. Shortly after my arrival in Chile in 1971, however, the government blocked *El Mercurio*'s access to newsprint. This, along with cutbacks in advertising and labor unrest, threatened to shut the paper down, and that would have been a tremendous loss. So the agency gave the paper roughly \$2 million over the course of two years, which allowed it to continue publishing.

After the failed coup in 1970, the CIA also maintained sources inside the Chilean military, but they were not nearly as numerous or important as the agency's

assets in the media and political parties. The agency wasn't getting regular information from high-ranking Chilean military personnel and had no meaningful relationship with Pinochet before he took power. In fact, the deputy station chief in Santiago had made contact with Pinochet but was unimpressed by him, considering him too weak to lead a coup.

EMPTY POTS AND PANS

The CIA's covert efforts to reduce support for Allende played an important role in the political turmoil that characterized his time in power. But the fierce opposition Allende faced was primarily a response to his own flawed economic policies, which hurt not only the wealthy but the middle and working classes as well. Perhaps fearing that his narrow margin of victory gave him little time to pursue his vision of a socialist Chile, Allende rushed into a program of land reform, nationalization of industry, and government spending to stimulate the economy. Initially, it seemed to work. In the government's first year, real GDP grew by nearly eight percent, production increased by more than 12 percent, and consumption levels grew at a rate of 13 percent. But by early 1971, Allende's economic populism began to backfire. Landlords became reluctant to maintain properties that might be seized at any moment. Business owners began leaving the country, taking their capital and entrepreneurial know-how with them. And the public at large suffered shortages of basic goods.

Allende faced political problems, too. The moderate Christian Democrats were alarmed by his nationalization of industry and opposed his agenda in parliament. Meanwhile, leftists in Allende's ruling

coalition thought he should move even faster. Their impatience bolstered the Revolutionary Left Movement, which sponsored seizures of privately held land in the countryside, often by violent means, creating a climate of fear and worsening food shortages.

Among my pool of covert assets at the time was an elderly middle-class woman, a grandmotherly type. She suggested putting together a demonstration in which women would carry pots and pans along with banners protesting the scarcity of food and basic household items. It sounded like a good idea, at least worth a small investment. I gave her several hundred dollars but had low expectations. So I was stunned a few weeks later when I was walking near a park not far from the U.S. embassy and heard the thunder of thousands of women parading down the street, pounding on pots and pans. There, among those directing the marchers toward the presidential palace, was my asset. Later that night, as the demonstrators gathered outside the palace, leftist students arrived on the scene and physically attacked the women. Images of Chilean housewives getting harassed by leftist youths flashed around the world, creating a publicity nightmare for the Allende government and a rallying point for the opposition.

The demonstration came to be known as "the March of the Empty Pots and Pans," and soon, similar protests were organized by other women's groups, sometimes aimed at the military, which the women challenged to act against Allende. In one particularly memorable protest, women threw chicken feed at soldiers, suggesting that they were too timid to oppose the president. Allende

tried to mitigate the damage by suggesting that the United States was behind the marches. Of course, to some degree, he was right. But blaming the United States—a tactic that had worked after the failed coup attempt in 1970—brought him limited success this time: his claims of American meddling had begun to sound like an excuse.

In October 1972, the main Chilean truckers' union went on strike. The country had limited railroads and little air transport, and most goods were carried by trucks owned by small, barely profitable firms. The truckers felt squeezed and worried that Allende was planning to nationalize their industry. When the president announced plans for a mixed public-private transport operation in the Aisén region, the truckers walked off the job. Shop owners closed their doors, partly in sympathy and partly because there would be no goods to buy or sell if the truckers weren't working. Within two weeks, bus and taxi drivers had joined in; soon after, professionals such as engineers, health-care workers, and pilots went on strike as well.

Some have alleged that the United States paid the truckers to go on strike. That is not true. The truckers asked the CIA for support, and the station chief thought it was a good idea. But the U.S. ambassador to Chile, Nathaniel Davis, opposed it. Davis did not dismiss the idea out of hand, however. He tried to maintain a good relationship with the CIA because he always feared the agency might take drastic action behind his back, as it had done to his predecessor in launching Track II. So he sent the truckers' request to Washington, where the White House officially rejected it.

THE TANK PUTSCH

By the spring of 1973, as the economy spiraled downward and street demonstrations became routine, rumors began to spread of an imminent coup. The station dutifully reported to Langley the chatter its officers were hearing, but the CIA's analysts were skeptical. They did not believe the military would subvert the constitution, and there had been false alarms before. Earlier that year, a covert Chilean asset had called his CIA case officer and said, "My aunt is sick and may not live to recover." The agreed-on phrase to indicate that a coup was under way was somewhat different: "My aunt has died." The ambiguous call, coupled with other indications that plotting was under way, led the CIA station to believe that a coup was about to take place. The station sent a CRITIC cable warning Washington to be prepared. The next morning, when nothing happened, the station ended up with egg on its face.

Yet in June 1973, an actual coup attempt did take place. A group of about 80 soldiers from an army tank unit who had been drinking heavily decided to free an officer who had been arrested earlier for calling for a coup. They obtained the officer's release from the Ministry of National Defense and drove a column of 16 armored vehicles to the presidential palace and the ministry headquarters, convinced that they could light a spark that would ignite the entire armed forces.

But the army's commander in chief, General Carlos Prats, was determined to secure the military's tradition of nonintervention, and he went in person to the presidential palace to confront the soldiers, who backed down and returned

to their base with little resistance. After the failure of this so-called tank putsch, the CIA concluded that there would never be a military coup. What the agency didn't realize was that senior officers in the military had been rattled by the challenge to their authority and feared that a breakdown in discipline would spread. They believed that the younger officers would press for a coup, and senior officers such as Pinochet worried that if they didn't join forces with the upstarts, they would be swept away by them. Far from marking the end of coup plotting, the tank putsch was when it began in earnest.

In the street, strikes and protests continued apace. In August, after an anti-Allende protest organized and attended by military wives, Prats resigned and Pinochet became commander in chief. By then, the mood in the entire country had darkened, and the CIA began to reconsider the prospect that a coup might take place. Less than three weeks after Pinochet's promotion, my friend called from the airport.

"THE BABY WILL BE DELIVERED TOMORROW"

In the days leading up to the coup, some State Department officials in the U.S. embassy in Santiago did not trust the information the CIA had received. "You issue a memo like that every Friday," scoffed a friend of mine who worked there. It's true that the station had been hearing and reporting coup rumors for weeks, but we had never had the kind of solid information we did now, which we had confirmed with three separate high-quality sources, each of whom provided more details.

On the night of September 10, a skeleton crew, including the station chief

and me, stayed in the CIA station so that we would be ready to take reports from the field when the coup began. The phone rang. "The baby will be delivered tomorrow," a voice said, then hung up. I had no idea who was calling, and the message didn't match any of the agreed-on codes. But I sensed someone was trying to tell us what we already knew: a coup was about to start. The phone rang again. "Uncle Jonas will be in town tomorrow" was the message this time. We received similar calls throughout the night, and by 7 AM the next day, we were on tenterhooks, waiting to see if our sources were correct. Time passed with no word. We feared we had another false alarm on our hands and that our credibility might be permanently compromised. Then, at 8 AM, we got the report: the navy had started the coup with an uprising in the city of Valparaíso. Our source had been off by an hour.

By 9 AM, the armed forces were in control of all of Chile except for the center of Santiago. When informed of the coup, Allende had refused to resign and gone directly to the presidential palace. Troops filled the streets downtown. Skirmishes and sporadic fire-fights erupted. Barricades went up around the U.S. embassy, and traffic ground to a halt. Shortly before noon, Chilean air force jets screamed across the skies over downtown Santiago and began firing rockets into the presidential palace. The whole city erupted in gunfire. At around 2 PM, Chilean troops stormed the presidential palace. The CIA learned from sources who were present at the assault that the military planned only to capture Allende, not to execute him. But he took his own life rather than become a prisoner of



Caesar Augusto: Pinochet reviews troops inside the presidential palace in Santiago

the military. By 2:30 PM, Pinochet's reign had begun.

Washington hailed Allende's demise as a major victory. Nixon and his national security adviser, Henry Kissinger, were pleased. So was the CIA: against all odds, the Santiago station had helped create a climate for the coup without tainting the effort by becoming directly involved. In the heady days immediately following, we took pride in having helped thwart the development of Cuban-style socialism in Chile and having prevented the country's drift into the Soviet orbit. We expected that Pinochet's junta would hold on to power only long enough to stabilize the economy and would soon thereafter call for elections and step aside.

BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU WISH FOR

Events quickly dampened the sense of triumph. Soon after the coup, I met with a high-value asset who had infiltrated an extremist wing of the Chilean Socialist Party. After the coup, he had been arrested in a military roundup, and then interrogated and tortured. He was a tough guy, but we were concerned that he might have divulged his ties to the CIA under pressure, so we approached the meeting with caution and placed the meeting site under heavy surveillance. If he had been compromised, he could have been turned against us and instructed to feed us false information. Fortunately, the Chilean military interrogators who had questioned him had no inkling of his

affiliation with the CIA and never asked him about any ties to the agency.

At our meeting, he described his torture in graphic detail. Despite the beatings, he had stuck to his story and eventually convinced his interrogators that he was not affiliated with the extremist element of the Socialist Party. But he must have detected a bit of suspicion on my part: Was his story incomplete? Was he exaggerating his abuse? In order to prove his point, he rolled up his pants to reveal ugly scars and black-and-blue marks on his legs, left by the abuse he had suffered after being shackled and yanked around by his captors. Whatever reservations I had about his trustworthiness disappeared.

The worst was yet to come. In a secret memo dated September 24, 1973, less than two weeks after the coup, the CIA station in Santiago reported that "the deaths of the great majority of persons killed in cleanup operations against extremists . . . are not recorded. Only the Junta members will have a really clear idea of the correct death figures, which they will probably keep secret." On October 12, another memo quoted a source saying that the Pinochet regime had killed 1,600 Chilean civilians between September 11 and October 10.

It also quickly became clear that Pinochet had no intention of relinquishing power. And over the course of the next year, the Pinochet regime's human rights violations and its imposition of martial law cast doubt on the wisdom of U.S. policy in Chile. At the CIA station, we continued to hear disturbing reports of mass arrests, torture, and the "forced disappearance" and killing of people regarded as subversives. Many Chileans were not troubled by these

actions. They deeply feared the extreme leftists and didn't believe that the military would harm innocent civilians. They were wrong. Years later, official Chilean investigations revealed that the Pinochet regime had murdered more than 2,200 people for political reasons and had imprisoned more than 38,000, many of whom were tortured.

My fellow CIA officers and I were seriously disillusioned by the brutality and repression of the Pinochet regime. None of us ever imagined that Pinochet's dictatorship would last until 1990. That outcome has troubled me over the years, but it has not shaken my faith in the positive potential of covert action. When I arrived in Santiago, every indication was that the Allende government was intent on undermining the political opposition, threatening Chile's independent media, and moving Chile into the Soviet sphere of influence. In that environment, it was fair game to support the opposition parties and help the media resist such antidemocratic actions. I'm convinced that if the Chilean military had not intervened in September 1973, our covert-action programs would have sustained the opposition until the next election and the Allende government would have been defeated at the ballot box—a far more preferable outcome than the Pinochet regime.

When a new station chief arrived shortly before my departure from Chile, in 1974, he asked me to write a memo about the situation in the country. I produced a rather blunt document suggesting that the United States should start using the same covert tactics against the Pinochet regime that it had used against Allende, in order to bring about a return to democratic governance. I

doubt the station chief agreed at the time, and he probably never sent my memo to Washington, if for no other reason than to protect my career.

KNOW YOUR LIMITS

The U.S. experience in Chile in the early 1970s offered a number of lessons about how to carry out good covert actions and how to avoid bad ones. Some of those lessons have been learned, but too many have not. This poses a problem for the United States as it leaves behind an era defined by major military actions in Afghanistan and Iraq and enters a new period, in which covert operations will become more crucial in places such as Iran, Pakistan, Syria, and Ukraine.

To most clearly grasp the lessons of Chile, consider the differences between the Track I and the Track II covert actions. The planners of Track I took into account the political environment in Chile and concluded that it would be difficult and probably unwise to attempt to overthrow a democratically elected leader who enjoyed genuine public support; better, they surmised, to limit themselves to restraining any antidemocratic impulses Allende expressed once in office. Track I's planners also recognized that even that more modest goal would require a well-coordinated plan that drew on the support and expertise of different parts of the U.S. national security system.

By contrast, when Track II was launched, the conditions on the ground in Chile did not favor the kind of military coup the plan envisioned, and the Chilean coup plotters with whom the CIA aligned itself lacked adequate resources and popular support. Yet the Nixon White House subscribed to the

idea that all it would take was a spark, a belief that officials sometimes latch on to when considering whether to undertake covert actions—and which usually proves to be wrong. Track II also failed to coordinate the activities of different arms of the U.S. government. The plan was hatched and handled by a very small group of White House staffers and CIA officials, and they kept the State Department largely in the dark—including even the U.S. ambassador to Chile.

Washington needs to avoid such missteps in the coming years, which are certain to witness increased covert competition between the United States and its adversaries. U.S. officials will need to become more adroit practitioners of the covert arts. As they hone their craft, they should never lose sight of how political realities in other countries can constrain U.S. intelligence activities, and they should remember that excessive secrecy and bureaucratic turf battles can compromise even the best-designed, most justified covert actions. ●